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# Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of U.S. Congressman Kenny Hulshof

Co-chair, Mississippi River Caucus

The Upper Mississippi Navigation Study

March 15, 2001

I want to welcome everyone here today on behalf of the Mississippi River Caucus. This hearing is the second in a series of three we will hold this month on the issues of flood control and navigation. We are pleased today to welcome a number of very distinguished experts to the Caucus who will be offering valuable testimony on the Upper Mississippi River-Illinois Waterway System Navigation Study.

The purpose of today's hearing is to discuss some of the more complex issues surrounding the Navigation Study, which, as you know, has been a target for controversy over the past year or so. In our view, it is high time that Congress address this issue head-on. Our intention, with the help of the assembled experts, is to delve into the details and specifics of the study, in order to gain a better understanding of the myriad of complicated issues involved.

I am aware that it is quite possible that some of us up here may have differing opinions about the Inspector General and the National Academy of Sciences reports. Hopefully, after this hearing -- and the next -- the Caucus will come away with a greater understanding and consensus.

Before we delve into the specifics of exceedingly complex economic matters, such as the value of "N," I would like to talk about a few of the issues surrounding lock extension on the Upper Mississippi that I believe everyone can agree upon.

First, I believe everyone would agree that the locks along the Upper Mississippi River were built primarily during the Great Depression and were designed for a life span of 50 years. Obviously, we are well beyond that point.

Second, I believe everyone would agree that the cost of maintaining the locks is getting more costly each year as they age. In other words, it is becoming decreasingly cost effective to delay action.

Third, while we barely maintain our infrastructure, it is clear that other countries, such as Brazil, are aggressively investing in theirs.

Finally, about 60 percent of our country's agricultural commodities travel down the Mississippi River for export, which clearly makes this a significant economic issue.

Speaking on a common-sense level, the conclusion I draw from these facts is that work on our Upper Mississippi infrastructure is past due. This view is confirmed by our foreign competitors who unanimously agree that lock expansion on the Mississippi is not in their economic best interest.

I would also like to make the point that the validity of economic forecasts which seek to predict 50 years into the future are clearly in question. According to the recent National Academy of Science study, "No one can know or predict with confidence the demand for water transport -- or almost anything else 50 more years into the future." The NAS study further noted that such a study is "exceedingly difficult if not impossible."

In my opinion, what this all boils down to is that we need to sit down and decide whether exporting and the competitiveness of our farmers is a priority or not. If it is a priority, then we should go forth with lock expansion in the most aggressive way possible. If not, then debating the value of "N" for several more years is wholly appropriate.

I wish to inform the Caucus today that I do believe exports and the competitiveness of our farmers in the world market are, and should be, of the highest priority. Accordingly, I support expansion of the locks on the Upper Mississippi. In my opinion, it is time to stop our "herding cats" approach to this issue and time to start getting down to business like our foreign competitors.